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# Reaching Out and Beyond: A Review of Southeast Asian Writing in English [Book Review]

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## Reaching Out and Beyond: A Review of Southeast Asian Writing in English [Book Review]

by Kirpal Singh, Singapore Management University

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Rajeev Patke & Philip Holden, *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*, Routledge. 280pp.

The writers of this abbreviated history tell us that

Our literary history will have accomplished its purpose if we succeed in persuading new readers that the authors and texts we introduce in brief compass will reward further acquaintance, or, equally, if we cause readers familiar with the works we discuss within the contexts of national canons to view them afresh in a comparative light.

The aim is laudable, albeit ambitious. For it is never easy to try and satisfy both the novice and the initiated. Patke and Holden, both academics in the Department of English at the National University of Singapore, take on this enormous challenge and execute it fairly well, bearing in mind that this is, avowedly, only a "concise" discussion of a terribly complex region with its even more complex literature, or, more accurately, literatures. Anyone attempting such a godlike task must know that no matter how successful the execution there will always be some blood—and some blood-letting—left! (pardon the pun). The writers must, nevertheless, be congratulated on taking on the herculean challenge and for providing us with a readable, if sometimes ponderous, access to a field newly opened up for serious examination. Such a book is timely and I am sure both categories of readers the book is aimed at will find much to mull over and possibly to reflect on and research.

The book's coverage of the convoluted history itself is not without fault. In wanting to simplify the cross-currents of historic events as they have fashioned and shaped the sensibilities of the region's richly diverse peoples, I fear the writers fell into that inevitable trap of easy generalisation parading as illustrations of scholastic theories, stretching uneasily their formulations of action and reaction. Literary writers—the poets, fictionists, playwrights—are wont to both act and react, but what critics and scholars usually explore is the reaction rather than the action aspect of most writers. While this is obvious, what is sometimes less apparent is the loss of that inextricable tension which much of the literature(s) under scrutiny contains. Thus, if we consider here the poetry of say, Edwin Thumboo—the undisputed doyen of Singaporean writing in English—it becomes abundantly clear that Thumboo's poetry is not merely a reaction to events around him, but even more insistently an action designed to influence and set in motion several different routes of perspective and understanding

vis-à-vis the growth of the fabulous Lion City. The difficulty of separating Singaporean from Malayan writing notwithstanding, especially before Singapore became a sovereign nation in 1965, it is still important to note that even the early poems of Thumboo act to demonstrate his acute awareness of the underlying stresses and strains enveloping the sensibilities of people, and thereby helping to put in place a possible way of coming to terms with the hectic twists and turns of history. I am not here disputing our authors' rather shy admittance of the poet's primacy but pointing to the fact that any history of Singaporean poetry (for that matter of any nation) must take into serious account the role played by the writers who actively promoted a certain way of looking at the nation. I know that the crisp manner of discussion adopted by Patke and Holden may not allow due space for this because of constraints imposed by the fact that this book is but one in a Series and thus has to conform to the larger orientations informed by the Series' general intent. My point simply is that the reader has to be forewarned that the goal put forward by Patke and Holden at the very start is not to be taken lightly (or in vain): every reader must go away from this book to the source material if he/she wants to garner the real strength of the writers discussed.

That said, I think Patke and Holden have done us very good service in bringing out this book to guide us along as we savour the riches of the literatures (in English) which Southeast Asia has so far produced. In reading the book, I was impressed by the sheer amount of background materials which Patke and Holden must have ploughed through to harness their own conclusions, as well as the reach of their grasp in the knowledge that many writers who have been ignored or even neglected by recent scholars receive due recognition—and on occasion even a pointed discussion: such energy and diligence is itself significant. The authors don't leave us wondering too much as to where the real excitement for the student on the lookout for new stuff and new research areas is to be found—with the advent of the digital technologies with which the younger generation is so familiar, it is only too evident that the real excitement now resides in these new technologies. How and how powerfully they are going to create the nourishment needed for a more robust flowering of national or regional literatures (the latter a notion which Patke and Holden hint at, but don't seem to have wanted to explore and develop) is still left to be seen but our authors do, rightly and correctly, posit that the future invariably must consider and respond to global resonance which digital technologies usher. Whether or not the hybrid results of criss-crossing the multi-levels of generic as well as specific literary output will be as rich and rewarding is anybody's guess, though one thing is definite: increasingly the Southeast Asian literary landscape in English is going to provide much more provocation than Patke and Holden have allowed for in their book.